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AUTHOR Irwin, Paul M.
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ABSTRACT

Media reports suggest widespread illiteracy among adults who may not be able to read, write, speak, or otherwise communicate competently enough to meet the demands of modern society. No consensus has been reached regarding a definition of illiteracy or supporting statistics. Estimates of adult illiteracy range form 0.5% to 50%, meaning that of the 196 million Americans over age 14 in 1988, the number who are less than functionally proficient would range from 1 million to 100 million. Illiteracy and incompetence in the nation's work force imply losses through low productivity, accidents, employee errors, and extra training programs. High rates of illiteracy are reported among welfare recipients and those in criminal institutions. Federal assistance for adult education and literacy programs is primarily authorized through the Adult Education Act (AEA). The AEA serves an estimated 3.9 million people annually, with a fiscal year 1991 appropriation of $229 million. In 1983, the Adult Literacy Initiative was launched to increase national attention to adult literacy. Much of the public effort by states and localities to address literacy problems is organized under the federal AEA program. Literacy programs are also operated by private groups. Federal options for responding to the problems of adult illiteracy are continuation of existing programs, increased funding, targeting and prioritization, and increased federal initiative and leadership. A national commission might be established to define illiteracy and provide expert direction toward increasing the quality of literacy data. Current legislation addressing the problem includes the National Literacy Act of 1991, the Higher Education Technical Amendments, and the Strengthening Education for American Families Act. (17 references) (YLB)

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CRS Issue Brief

Adult Literacy Issues, Programs, and Options

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Updated April 5, 1991

by
Paul M. Irwin
Education and Public Welfare Division

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Adult Literacy Issues, Programs, and Options

SUMMARY

Media reports suggest widespread illiteracy among adults who may not be able to read, write, speak, or otherwise communicate competently enough to meet the demands of modern society. There is no consensus on the definition of illiteracy or supporting statistics. The U.S. Department of Education estimate of the adult illiteracy rate is 13% (17 to 21 million persons). Other estimates of illiteracy, functional incompetency, and marginal competency range from 0.5% to more than 50% of the adult population. Accordingly, of the 196 million Americans 14 years and over in 1988, the number who are less than functionally proficient would range from under 1 million to over 100 million.

Illiteracy and incompetency in the nation's workforce imply losses through low productivity, accidents, employee errors, and extra training programs. High rates of illiteracy are reported among welfare recipients and those in criminal institutions. Illiteracy also impinges on our military services and national security. There is no agreement on the costs of illiteracy, but some have estimated the annual amount at more than $200 billion.

Federal assistance for adult education and literacy programs is primarily authorized through the Adult Education Act (AEA). The AEA serves an estimated 3.9 million people annually, with an FY1991 appropriation of $229 million. The AEA was amended and extended through FY1993 by P.L. 100-297, the Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988. Other adult literacy provisions have been enacted as part of P.L. 100-418, the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988; P.L. 100-484, the Family Support Act of 1988; P.L. 101-254, the Library Services and Construction Act Amendments of 1990; P.L. 101-610, the National and Community Service Act of 1990; and P.L. 101-645, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act of 1990. The 101st Congress considered several comprehensive proposals to improve the Nation's literacy. None of these proposals were enacted, but similar proposals have been reintroduced in the 102d Congress, including the National Literacy Act of 1991, H.R. 751, and Title III of S. 2, the Strengthening Education for American Families Act.

A number of Federal options are discussed for responding to the problems of adult illiteracy. A wide variety of Federal programs are authorized to address these problems, and they might be continued without change. Funding for these programs might be increased so that larger portions of the target populations can be served. Federal programs might be amended to clarify priorities or to target assistance on adults most in need. Federal initiative and leadership might be increased in order to promote greater coordination among Federal programs and increased effort from States, localities, and the private sector. A national commission might be established to define illiteracy and provide expert direction toward increasing the quality of literacy data.

ISSUE DEFINITION

Media reports suggest widespread illiteracy among adults who may not be able to read, write, speak, or otherwise communicate competently enough to meet the demands of modern society. There is no consensus on the definition of illiteracy or supporting statistics. The U.S. Department of Education estimate of the adult illiteracy rate is 13% (17 to 21 million persons). Other estimates of illiteracy, functional incompetency, and marginal competency range from 0.5% to more than 50% of the adult population. Accordingly, of the 196 million Americans 14 years and over in 1988, the number who are less than functionally proficient would range from under 1 million to over 100 million. Definitions of literacy and competency, and appropriate responses, are at issue.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

The scope of adult literacy can range from the simple ability to read and write one's own name to the collection of complex skills needed for an individual to function effectively in our modern-day technological society. The scope of remediation or prevention of literacy problems can likewise be broad, from parents reading stories to their children to the entire educational enterprise; the latter receives Federal funding of $33.2 billion and total funding of $397 billion from all sources, with additional amounts spent by private industry for basic skills training.

The scope of this analysis is limited to adult literacy and proficiency problems and their remedy, including the definitions and numbers, current activities directly related to adult illiterates, and possible Federal options. The issue of preventing adult illiteracy seems to have no boundary short of the inclusion of major parts of American education and society, and will generally not be discussed.

Definitions and Numbers

The two general types of literacy definitions are (a) conventional, involving simple reading and writing skills, and (b) functional, where a more complex set of skills and proficiencies is used as the standard.

Conventional Literacy

The U.S. Census Bureau periodically collects literacy data. In a 1979 survey of ancestry and language, all persons 14 years and over who had less than a sixth grade education were counted as illiterate if they reported they were (a) unable to read and write English at all, or (b) unable to read and write a language other than English which they also spoke at home. These attributes constitute the "conventional" or "traditional" definition of illiteracy. The Census Bureau estimated that 0.6% of adults were illiterate in 1979. Based on a sample of 2,500 households, this estimate is dependent on the accuracy of persons reporting their inability to read and write.

The Census Bureau estimated the nation's illiteracy rate at 0.5% for 1980. If this rate were applied to the 196 million adults age 14 years old and older in 1988, the estimated number of illiterates would be nearly 1 million. Census data show a steady decline in American illiteracy rates from 20.0% in 1870, to 0.5% in 1980.

Functional Illiteracy

The term "functional illiteracy" began to be used during the 1940s and 1950s to describe persons who were incapable of understanding written instructions necessary to accomplish specific tasks or functions. In particular, the U.S. Army used tests to distinguish World War II trainees who needed additional educational training before they could comprehend written military instructions. The conventional definition of literacy proved insufficient for making these distinctions.

Definitions of functional literacy depend on the specific tasks, skills, or objectives thought necessary for the comprehension of a literate person. As various experts defined clusters of "needed" skills, definitions proliferated. This definitions became more complex as the technological and information needs of the society increased. The definitions discussed below include grade-level equivalency; a 1982 ED survey; a 1985 survey of young Americans by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); and the 1975 Adult Performance Level (APL) study. In a 1978 report, the National Institute of Education summarized other studies and statistics about functional literacy.

Grade-Level Equivalency: Functional literacy definitions in the 1940s and 1950s used the level of skills that should be provided by a fifth or sixth grade education. By the 1970s, there were suggestions that a tenth or even a twelfth grade education was necessary. For 1988, the Census Bureau estimates that 152 million persons were 25 years old and over; of these, 2.4% had completed less than 5 years of school (4 million persons), 6.8% had completed less than 8 years of school (10 million), and 23.7% had completed less than 12 years of school (36 million). The use of these data to estimate functional literacy rates has the drawback that the number of grades completed does not necessarily correspond to the actual level of skills of adult individuals.

ED Survey: The ED estimates an illiteracy rate of 13% for American adults 20 years old and over, or 17 to 21 million persons. The estimate is based on the Census Bureau's 1982 English Language Proficiency Survey; a national sample of 3,400 adults responded to 26 written questions related to English comprehension. Those correctly answering 20 or more questions were identified by the ED as literate. Of the illiterate adults (fewer than 20 correct answers), the ED estimates that 1/3 were born abroad and nearly all of these spoke a non-English language at home; 1/3 were age 60 or over; and 70% of the native English speakers dropped out before completing high school. State literacy rates are available from this survey, but few details on specific population groups have been published.

NAEP Survey: With ED funding, the Education Testing Service (ETS) conducted the NAEP survey, a national sample of the literacy skills of 3,600 young adults ages 21 to 25 years old in 1985. ETS defined three types of literacy skills: prose, document, and quantitative. It found that an overwhelming majority of young adults performed adequately at the lower level of each type of literacy, but that only a relatively small percentage performed the more difficult and challenging tasks associated with each type. NAEP explores the complexities of these various literacy skills, and provides detailed information on specific questions, such as who can correctly use an index to locate information in an almanac. The survey does not estimate general functional literacy rates for population groups, States, or the nation.

APL Study: The federally funded APL study included a national sample of 7,500 adults. Based on a questionnaire of nearly 300 questions, this 1975 study found that 20% of the adults were functionally incompetent; 34% were marginally competent, or "just getting by;" and 46% were estimated to be fully competent or proficient. Using 1970 census data for persons 18 to 64 years old (115 million adults), the APL study estimated 23 million persons to be functionally incompetent, 39 million marginally competent, and 53 million functionally proficient adults in the nation in 1970. If the APL rates are applied to the 196 million persons 14 years and over in 1988, then 39 million would be functionally incompetent, 67 million would be marginal, and 90 million would be competent (or 106 million less than competent adults). The APL provides competency rates for many population groups, but not for States. Other drawbacks include: (a) the national survey has not been repeated; and (b) a majority of adults are classified by the APL as less than competent when many of these persons can read, write, and perform simple calculations.

Increasing Illiteracy?

Despite apparent consensus that some measure of functional illiteracy must replace the conventional definition, no agreement has been reached on a definition. Without a widely accepted measure of illiteracy, it is difficult to document, or refute, media reports of widespread illiteracy. For the same reasons, there is no way to determine whether illiteracy is increasing or decreasing in the adult population. Several elements may lead to the perception of increasing illiteracy, in some cases without any actual change taking place.

First, the use of illiteracy percentages with current population data to update the estimated number of illiterates can lead to a larger number merely because the population has grown. Second, the various definitions of functional literacy appear to be relative to the demands made by society for communication skills; as these demands have grown, so have the standards for literacy, causing increased estimates of illiterates without any changes occurring in the actual skills held by adults. Third, national attention on issues such as recent immigrants, high school dropouts, the quality of American education, and the relative population growth of minority youth has suggested additional literacy problems in these areas. Without a standard definition and longitudinal data, however, no realistic method exists to distinguish between an actual increase in illiteracy and increased national attention to illiteracy.

International Comparisons

Comparison of literacy rates among nations is based on the conventional definition of illiteracy; there appear to be no reliable comparisons of functional literacy. Based on the rate of 0.5% illiteracy, the United States has been ranked in a 9-way tie for being the most literate nation by the Census Bureau in 1985. Although the claim is made sometimes that the United States ranks 49th in literacy among the 158 members of the United Nations, Secretary of Education William Bennett is reported by Education Daily (Dec. 5, 1985) to have said that this ranking "has no factual basis."

In a related area, international comparisons of student achievement have been made; these have been limited to the elementary and secondary educational level. Overall, the scores of pupils at all age levels in the United States have been at approximately the same as the international average in reading and literature, and

considerably lower in science, mathematics, and foreign languages (CRS Report 88-764 EPW, *Comparative Education: Statistics on Education in the United States and Selected Foreign Nations*).

Societal Consequences

Media reports often connect functional illiteracy with adverse consequences to the individual and society. The consequences to the individual seem obvious in terms of material benefit, such as lack of employment, income, and job status; and psychological benefit, such as lack of self-esteem. A 1985 report by the Commission on Reading suggests the consequences to families through the intergenerational transmission of literacy problems. Societal consequences are more difficult to establish, but the connection of illiteracy with social problems is mentioned in some of the research.

A significant degree of illiteracy among the employed implies large costs to employers and the nation through low productivity, accidents, employee errors, and extra training programs. Job training programs often need a basic educational skills component to make the training effective.

High rates of functional illiteracy are reported among those on public assistance and in criminal institutions. Illiteracy also impinges on our military services and national security. In a 1986 study of illiteracy by the National Advisory Council on Adult Education, an estimated 40% of Armed Services enlistees was found to read below the 9th-grade level. An estimated two-thirds of the nation's colleges find it necessary to provide remedial reading and writing courses.

Some have tried to calculate the costs of illiteracy. Fifty percent of prisoners are functionally illiterate; the annual cost of their imprisonment is estimated at $6 billion, according to former Secretary of Education T. H. Bell. A survey of corporations led to an estimated cost of $10 billion in remedial programs in reading, writing, and math for employees, according to Roger Thompson; however, some of these expenditures may be for training activities that are more advanced than basic educational skills and literacy training. Jonathan Kozol estimates direct expenditures of $20 billion annually for items such as prisons, welfare related to illiteracy, and industrial and military accidents, plus another $100 billion in indirect costs to the loss in GNP and productivity. The American Library Association claims that functionally illiterate adults cost $224 billion annually in welfare payments, crime, job incompetence, lost taxes, and remedial education. The Literacy Volunteers of America estimates the loss of $237 billion per year in unrealized earnings forfeited by those who lack basic learning skills.

Adult Education Act and Other Federal Programs

The first significant Federal adult literacy programs began in the military services; programs for civilians started with the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1964, providing job training for the unemployed. Many participants were found to be functionally illiterate, and the program was amended to provide basic educational skills. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 provided the first State grants for persons needing basic literacy skills. The Adult Education Act (AEA) was enacted as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1966 (P.L. 89-750). The AEA has

been amended several times since 1966, but the basic purpose and structure have remained similar since its inception.

Adult Education Act

The AEA is the major source of Federal funds for programs that benefit educationally disadvantaged adults. The purposes of the AEA are to expand educational opportunities for adults and establish programs that will enable adults to acquire basic literacy skills necessary to function in society, enable adults to complete a secondary school education, and make available to adults the means to secure training and education that will enable them to become more employable, productive, and responsible citizens. AEA funds are distributed by formula to States, where an estimated 3.9 million participants are served annually. Based on 1980 census data, ED estimates the AEA target population -- those age 16 and over who lack a high school diploma and are out of school -- to be 51.8 million.

Funding: Annual Federal appropriations for adult education programs (AEA and, since 1987, homeless adult literacy programs) have grown steadily since FY1986. Funding was $98 million in that year. Funding grew to $113 million for FY1987, $134 million for FY1988, and $162 million for FY1989.

The **FY1990 appropriation** was $185 million for AEA programs (including $158 million for State grants, $20 million for workplace literacy grants, $6 million for English literacy grants, and $2 million for national programs). For related programs, $7 million was appropriated for homeless adult programs, $5 million for Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) literacy programs, $24 million for Even Start, and $5 million for the student literacy corps.

The **FY1991 appropriation**, enacted by P.L. 101-517, is $229 million for AEA programs (including $201 million for State grants, $19 million for workplace literacy grants, $1 million for English literacy grants, and $8 million for national programs), $10 million for homeless adult programs, $8 million for LSCA literacy programs, $50 million for Even Start, and $5 million for the student literacy corps.

The **FY1992 budget request** is $251 million for AEA programs (including $222 million for State grants, $19 million for workplace literacy grants, $1 million for English literacy grants, and $9 million for national programs), and $60 million for Even Start. The budget proposes the termination of funding for homeless adult education programs, LSCA literacy programs, and the student literacy corps; however, substitute funding is suggested in each instance. For homeless adult education programs, the budget proposes the inclusion of similar activities in a $57 million consolidated block grant for the homeless, administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, with applications for homeless programs involving education being subject to ED review. For LSCA literacy programs, the budget proposes the termination of all other LSCA programs except for a $35 million State grant program under a revised LSCA authority, with funds restricted to literacy activities. For the student literacy corps, the budget proposes $7 million for an expanded program of innovative projects for community services under Title X of the Higher Education Act of 1965; the primary emphasis would be on community services and volunteers, but literacy services would be included as an authorized activity.

Other Federal Programs

A 1990 study of Federal adult education programs has been completed for ED by the Cosmos Corporation. Not yet published, the study found 80 programs in 12 Federal agencies supporting adult education activities; specific funding of $218.4 million in FY1989 was identified for 26 of these programs.

On June 12, 1986, at congressional hearings, the ED testified on a previous survey of Federal adult literacy programs. The survey identified 79 programs in 14 Federal agencies. A total Federal expenditure for literacy activities of $347 million in FY1985 was identified with these programs; however, ED considers the actual amount may be greater, since 47 of the 79 programs were unable to identify specific literacy funding data. Numbers of program participants were not identified in the survey.

On Mar. 26, 1987, the House Committee on Education and Labor issued a staff analysis of the ED survey. The Committee staff concluded the ED had overstated both the number of programs and the amount of funding for such programs. It said that only 10 of the 79 programs definitely conduct literacy activities; 38 of the 79 programs were not involved with these activities; and only $126.5 million of the $347 million claimed by the ED was actually spent on adult literacy activities.

Other Federal education programs are related in some degree to the prevention of illiteracy. Of particular note are the Chapter 1 program for compensatory education programs for educationally disadvantaged youth, and the inexpensive book distribution program (for Reading Is Fundamental, Inc.). As indicated previously, the general issues of illiteracy prevention are beyond the scope of this report.

Recent Legislation

The **101st Congress** considered, but did not reach final agreement on, a comprehensive proposal to reduce or eliminate illiteracy in the Nation. Two such measures passed the House, and one passed the Senate. The bills would have authorized a variety of programs at the Federal, State, and local levels to provide assistance for adults in need. Similar proposals have been introduced in the 102d Congress (S. 2, H.R. 751). The 101st Congress did enact several other measures related to adult education and literacy, including: an increase of the allotment of AEA State grants to the territories (P.L. 101-26); an extension of LSCA library literacy programs through FY1994 (P.L. 101-254); an extension of the student literacy corps through FY1991 (P.L. 101-305); the enactment of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 to authorize various programs to improve basic skills and reduce illiteracy (P.L. 101-610); and an extension of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act education programs for homeless adults through FY1993 (P.L. 101-645).

The **100th Congress** amended and extended the AEA and a number of other literacy measures. The Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988 (P.L. 100-297): amended and extended the AEA through FY1993 and established separate AEA programs of workplace literacy partnerships and English literacy grants; required the Secretary of Education to define the basic skills needed for literacy and to estimate the number of illiterate adults in the nation; initiated the Even Start Program of adult literacy for parents and their children; authorized family English literacy activities under the

Bilingual Education Act; and authorized several other adult literacy programs and provisions. A literacy and remedial education program for homeless adults was enacted as part of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (P.L. 100-77), and its extension through FY1990 (P.L. 100-628). The Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-418) authorized several new adult literacy education and training programs, including the student literacy corps. The Family Support Act of 1988 authorized education and job training provisions for specified welfare recipients, including those who have not completed high school or its equivalent (P.L. 100-485).

Other Public and Private Efforts

Federal Efforts

The Adult Literacy Initiative was launched in the ED on Sept. 7, 1983. According to former Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, the Initiative was designed "to increase national attention to the promotion of adult literacy and to enhance existing literacy programs, while utilizing the Department's expertise in coordinating literacy programs nationwide" (American Legion Magazine, Dec. 1984). The Initiative is not a legislatively mandated program, but is based on various discretionary authorities available to the Secretary of Education.

The Initiative's operations have included the following: (1) assistance with the transfer of basic skills technology from the Army to other public agencies and the private sectors; (2) work with the Federal Interagency Committee on Education to identify new resources for literacy programs; (3) cooperation with the Council of State Planning Agencies to initiate a State Policy Academy on Adult Literacy in 10 States, and publication of a policy guide for enhancing adult literacy; (4) promotion of public and private sector involvement in literacy efforts, with a special focus on the development of basic skills in the workplace; (5) operation of an information clearinghouse on adult literacy; (6) promotion of the Federal Employee Literacy Training (FELT) program, where agencies encourage employees to volunteer as literacy tutors; (7) development, with the Department of Labor, of guidelines to identify workplace literacy problems and to establish programs to upgrade workplace literacy skills; and (8) publication, with the Departments of Labor and Commerce, describing the changing workplace and economy, and suggesting means to provide workers with the skills needed by employers.

In conjunction with the Initiative, the ED Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) concluded a series of projects. OERI supported the Commission on Reading to produce a synthesis of reading research and the state of the art in the teaching of reading; its 1985 report, "Becoming a Nation of Readers," recommends that (1) parents should increase their involvement in reading to preschool and in-school children, (2) teachers should make more effective use of simple phonics instruction, limited to no later than the second grade, (3) students should spend more time in independent reading, writing, and techniques of reading comprehension, (4) schools should be more supportive of reading and library programs, and (5) teacher programs should be improved.

State and Local Efforts

Much of the public effort by States and localities to address literacy problems is organized under the Federal AEA program. According to the ED, non-Federal expenditures related to the AEA were an estimated $510 million in FY1988. The current State and local figure may be even greater because of continuing growth in adult education and literacy activities. An ED summary of these activities includes 20 States with significant literacy activities, 24 States planning increased literacy activities, and 14 States with significantly increased appropriations for adult education. Numerous cities also have reported a variety of literacy projects.

Private Efforts

Literacy programs are operated by a multitude of private groups, including churches, businesses, labor unions, civic and ethnic groups, community and neighborhood associations, museums and galleries, and PTA groups. Two national groups provide voluntary tutors and instructional materials for private literacy programs, the **Laubach Literacy Action** (50,000 tutors) and **Literacy Volunteers of America** (30,000 tutors); each group has a long history of community service. At the instigation of the American Library Association, a group of 11 national organizations, including Laubach and Literacy Volunteers, created the **Coalition for Literacy** to deliver information and services at the national and local levels, including the maintenance of the toll-free **Literacy Hotline (800-228-8813)** to refer callers to local literacy programs and resources. In December 1984, the Coalition and the Advertising Council began the **National Literacy Awareness Campaign**, a 3-year advertising project to increase public awareness and recruit literacy volunteers. The **Business Council for Effective Literacy** is a foundation established in 1984 to foster "corporate awareness of adult functional illiteracy and to increase business involvement in the literacy field." The Council's quarterly newsletters contain descriptions of many current public and private literacy efforts. Other public and private efforts, including recommendations for additional action, has been summarized in a 1985 report by the Northeast-Midwest Institute. In December 1985, ABC television and the Public Broadcasting System began **Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS)**, an ongoing effort to produce media programs on literacy in conjunction with expanded local community services.

Federal Issues and Options

The variety of definitions, numbers, programs, and activities related to literacy problems creates a difficulty in attempting to define Federal literacy issues. A single-focus program is not likely to be an suitable response to the needs of various types of persons, such as immigrants and refugees, minority teenagers, dropouts, the unemployed, dislocated workers, employed workers with literacy problems, housewives entering the job market, or retirees. A second concern is that efforts to address the problem likely will depend on existing public agencies (schools or local governments) as the delivery system for programs. As with the target group, the capability of these agencies will differ, and administrative flexibility in the delivery of services would seem appropriate. A third concern is that the decision by individuals to participate in a literacy program appears to be a matter of personal choice. Individuals most in need of such programs may not recognize the advantages of participation, or, recognizing the

advantages, may be embarrassed to admit their inability because of the stigma of illiteracy. However, as parents tend to transmit literacy problems to their children, an effective literacy program may need to address this issue as well.

Program design may be a more tractable problem than the definition of illiteracy. The definition will help determine which target groups are most in need of additional services. If one of the broader definitions is used, such as the APL definition of marginal and incompetent persons, then a majority of adults would be classified as less than functionally proficient, and a significant number of otherwise successful professionals and competent homemakers would appear to need remedial services. As a result of defining functional literacy or competency so broadly, remedial programs might end up serving persons who are the least needy. For example, 20% of the college graduates and 43% of the employed are not functionally competent by APL standards.

Options for Federal action concerning the literacy problem are diverse. During its first term, the Reagan Administration requested a one-third reduction of Federal funds for the AEA, with the ultimate intent of "turning back" such programs to the States under the "Federalism Initiative." By the end of its first term, the Administration launched a research and public relations campaign through its Adult Literacy Initiative. At the other end of the spectrum, Jonathan Kozol has called for the Federal financing of a multi-billion dollar program for universal literacy in America.

Continuation of Existing Programs

Existing Federal programs that provide adult education and literacy services might be continued without amendment. These programs authorize a wide range of activities to address the most severe problems of adult literacy, although possibly not at the funding level required to resolve the general problem. The AEA provides grants to States for virtually all forms of adult basic education, and authorizes many national discretionary activities for research, development, demonstration, dissemination, and evaluation. Other Federal programs authorize special literacy activities, such as vocational education and training, bilingual vocational training, public libraries, Indian education, refugee education, and literacy training in the military. An alternative option might be to continue existing programs for adults, while strengthening elementary and secondary education to reduce or eliminate underskilled youth from joining the pool of adult illiterates. Opponents of this option might contend that existing programs simply have not worked, that there remains a severe national problem, and that the problem is increasing with constant technological change.

Increased Funding

Federal funding for adult literacy activities might be increased. Funds might be increased for all existing programs, or might be limited to specific national priorities, such as immigrants, high school dropouts, or dislocated workers. Despite the variety of existing legislation, few have suggested that the nation's literacy problems are about to be resolved. One of the criticisms of the AEA is that it reaches only a small portion of the target population; increased Federal funds might be one method of reaching more of that population. Opponents might contend that the Federal deficit precludes funding increases, that education is primarily a State and local responsibility, and that recent increases in State, local, and private funds reduces the need for additional Federal funds.

Targeting and Priorities

Federal priorities might be clarified to concentrate services for those most in need. Federal literacy programs, including the AEA, serve a wide variety of beneficiaries. These programs might be amended to restrict eligibility to those determined to be most severely affected by illiteracy, such as welfare recipients, unemployed youth, dislocated workers, pregnant teenagers, or recent immigrants. Opponents might contend that all educationally disadvantaged adults should be served equitably, without special groups being singled out for additional services, and that local program staff need greater flexibility to serve the diverse types of adults in need of educational services.

Federal Initiative and Leadership

The Administration's Adult Literacy Initiative is a Federal activity that might be continued, possibly with greater congressional direction and increased financial support. The Initiative has encouraged voluntary or private support for literacy programs, attempted to increase cooperation among Federal agencies, and promoted greater efforts among States and localities to address problems of adult literacy. The Initiative operates at a minimum Federal cost. Opponents might contend that such activities are a superficial response to a severe problem, that funding is needed to operate programs rather than advertising campaigns, and that the burden of national priorities should not be the responsibility of either the Secretary of Education or the States and localities.

Definitions and Numbers

A greater Federal effort might be made to define adult illiteracy and collect the data to determine the actual size and scope of the problem. The complexity of the issue--and its relation to national productivity, security, and welfare--suggests a Federal concern beyond program funding or public awareness campaigns. A national commission might be established to define illiteracy; the commission also might evaluate adult literacy priorities and recommend Federal responses. The commission might build upon the recommendations of the Commission on Reading, the NAEP assessment of young adults, and other recent studies. Opponents might contend that the current activities are sufficient, or that a federally imposed definition of illiteracy might lead to unnecessary Federal standards in an area traditionally left to States, localities, or the job market.

LEGISLATION

H.R. 751 (Sawyer)

National Literacy Act of 1991. This bill is a comprehensive set of amendments to address one of the national education goals by assisting State and local programs to provide literacy skills to all who need them by the year 2000. Programs include: the establishment of an interagency National Institute for Literacy, together with a National Institute Board, to conduct basic and applied research (authorized at $15 million for FY1992); AEA grants for State literacy resource centers to stimulate the coordination of local literacy services ($25 million); a National Workforce Literacy Assistance Collaborative at the U.S. Department of Labor to assist small and medium-sized business operate literacy programs to meet the needs of the workforce ($5

million); grants for national workforce literacy strategies under the AEA workforce literacy program ($60 million); amendment and extension of the AEA basic State grant programs, with an increased emphasis on the provision of literacy services to adults ($260 million); technical amendments to the Even Start program ($60 million); a family literacy public broadcasting program ($2 million); education programs for commercial drivers ($3 million); literacy challenge grants under the VISTA program ($2.5 million); a mandatory State program under the AEA of literacy services for incarcerated adults; and the extension of the student literacy corps through FY1992 ($11 million). The total authorization for all programs is $443.5 million for FY1992. Introduced Jan. 30, 1991; referred to Committee on Education and Labor; reported (H.Rept. 101-23); passed the House, amended, Mar. 19, 1991.

H.R. 1285 (W. Ford)

Higher Education Technical Amendments of 1991. Among other provisions, authorizes a commercial driver literacy program ($3 million for FY1991). P.L. 101-517 appropriated $2 million for such a program for FY1991, contingent on the enactment of authorizing legislation. Introduced Mar. 6, 1991; referred to Committee on Education and Labor; amended and reported without written report; passed the House, as amended, Mar. 19, 1991. Passed the Senate, without amendment, Mar. 2, 1991.

S. 2 (Kennedy)

Strengthening Education for American Families Act. Title III, the National Literacy Act of 1991, includes provisions that are similar to those of H.R. 751, except as follows: the establishment of an Interagency Task Force on Literacy; the authorization of the National Institute for Literacy is $10 million for FY1992 (instead of $15 million); authorization of the AEA is $280 million (instead of $260 million); and the total FY1992 authorization for these programs is $447.5 million (instead of $432.5 million). Introduced Jan. 14, 1991; referred to Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

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----- Elementary and secondary education: a summary of the Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, Public Law 100-297, by the Education Section. [Washington] June 22, 1988. 65 p.
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